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CIA In Trouble

THE CENTRAL Intelligence Agency's maiden press conference was a predictable knee-jerk by a beleaguered bureaucracy that sees its future as through a glass darkly.

The CIA, in trouble up to the hem of its Inverness cape, has concluded that its ancient remedies of bombast and secrecy will no longer avail. Its decision to hold a press conference was undoubtedly a traumatic experience for the elephantine espionage apparatus. It could have only been made after the most agonizing introspection.

It is nonsense to allege that the spy stuff disgorged at the press conference was the rationale for calling in the reporters. The substance of what was said had been leaked days ago, so the conclusion is inescapable that the press conference was held for some other purpose. It is assumed here that the real aim of the CIA's gingerly step into public relations was to make a start in reconstructing an image that has been sorely lumped recently.

In all modesty history requires us to show that one of the biggest lumps was raised by this very typewriter. That one showed last fall that the CIA's posture in Saigon was one of astonishing arrogance, willful disregard of ordained authority, and headlong forays into policy making and military operations.

There was a notable fluttering in the CIA spookcotes around Washington (the ghastly organism has already outgrown its huge new plant near McLean, Va.). The late President was persuaded to deny the story, although he could have had no knowledge of its truth or nontruth, other than the self-serving disclaimers of the CIA itself. Well, sir or madam, Mr. Kennedy did deny the story, although in curiously equivocal terms. His denial, moreover, was cast in its true perspective by the fact that the CIA's chief resident spook in Saigon was ordered home immediately on the heels of our account of his stewardship.

The CIA, with dismal lack of imagination, undertook then to discredit reporter, having signally failed to discredit the story. This is an old wheeze in Washington, as numbers of my enterprising colleagues can bear witness.

Sadly for the CIA, another and most grievous welt was raised by former President Harry S. Truman. He wrote himself a piece in which he sourly observed that the CIA had overstepped its original purpose. He specifically mentioned policy making and operations. Shortly afterward, Truman was visited by the deputy director of the CIA, Gen. Marshall Carter. He, with other officials, spent 90 minutes talking to the former President on matters unspecified.

Next up at bat against the CIA was Sen. Eugene McCarthy (D., Minn.), who plowed substantially the same furrow in a magazine piece. Truman's pen was sharper than a serpent's tooth, because he was the daddy of the CIA. But McCarthy's attack was perhaps more dangerous, because he is one of the prime movers in twin Congressional proposals that are anathema to the CIA. One would place the spy agency under the scrutiny of a House-Senate committee patterned after the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy. The other would simply order a Congressional investigation of the CIA by a select committee of the Senate.

This did not appear in the local outlet,
WASHINGTON DAILY NEWS.

Well, what was a big, hog-fat, oil sheik-rich, monumentally unaccountable, morbidly secretive branch of government to do? Take a chance on its traditional policy of secrecy and intimidation to carry it through the hard times that plainly are a'coming? Or sacrifice just a little of its vestal purity by holding a press, ugh, conference?

We have seen what the choice was, and now we must wait and see how effective this gesture is to be. Perhaps, like the lass who has faltered once, the CIA will find it easier the second time. If this proves true, perhaps Americans might finally begin to learn a little about the terrifying compass of the nation's venture into spying, conspiracy and intrigue.